



Using Letters

During the Great Depression, men, women and children wrote letters to President Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor, as well as Cabinet members and heads of agencies. The letters were written by the young and old, white and black, poor and well off, rural and urban residents, unemployed and those on relief. These letters express the raw emotional reactions to the Depression and New Deal, including their hopes, fears, anger, despair, and feeling about the government and its programs. The letters, as primary documents, capture the daily attitudes and emotions of people written at the time. The letters put the reader in direct contact with those who lived through the Great Depression. Students can select one or more photographs and put themselves in the shoes of the person in the photograph and write a letter to President Roosevelt or another government figure about their plight and what they need. Or they can write a letter to a friend or relative about his or her feelings about the FSA photography project.

Students can also read letters contained in *Down & Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the "Forgotten Man"* (Edited by Robert S. McElvaine, Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1983) and write an essay about the themes expressed in the letters. Another excellent book to use in the classroom is *A Secret Gift: How One Man's Kindness – And a Trove of Letters – Revealed the Hidden History of the Great Depression* (Ted Gup, New York: Penguin Press, 2010). The book tells the story of letters written in response to an ad placed in a small newspaper in Canton, Ohio in December 1932. The ad offered cash gifts to 75 families. Readers were asked to send letters describing their situation. The author's grandfather had placed the ad under a pseudonym. The author searched records and for relatives to tell how the gifts impacted those who received them. It is a fascinating account of those who wrote the letters and what happened to their families.